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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that modern languages be placed in the center of the secondary/comprehensive curriculum. Modern language study in the secondary school is considered from the following standpoints: academic; linguistic; travel; skill development in speaking, listening, and other language processes; and cultural and social benefits. It is also proposed that mixed-ability teaching methods best fit comprehensive education. The mixed-ability method is briefly compared with streaming, banding, and setting methods. (SW)

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TEACHING MODERN LANGUAGES IN A MIXED-ABILITY COMMUNITY

I would like to make it quite clear, from the outset, that I do not consider myself to be a teacher of Modern Languages only—French, German, Spanish, whatever—but to be a teacher of children.

By that I mean that my function, in the classroom, is not just to instruct children in my particular specialism, but to take into account the whole child: his (since I teach in a boys school), personality, his character, his needs, his deficiencies, his gifts. His home life certainly, is a very important influence in his performance at school.

For example, a boy of high ability who continually underperforms because, we believe, his parents show a lack of interest in their child. In this case I consult with other colleagues:—

his other subject teachers

his class teacher—person whose class it is

his year master—person who has a general administration role; organises assemblies, discipline

his counsellor—pastoral responsibility

—and I consult with them about what our, and my approach should be.

I hope you are forming the impression that I do not teach youngsters in isolation, but am part of a support structure to help that child.

On the other hand I am convinced that I, and my specialism have a very great, perhaps unique contribution to make to any child's education. I believe that modern languages which in my life have been so important, from which I have taken so much, which have helped to form me as a person, which have contributed so much to my life whether through travel, experiences of other countries, through other ways of life, through meeting people of vastly different tastes and opinions, which have enabled me to live for a time abroad—modern languages have an important and vital part to play in any child's education.

Modern Languages in the Curriculum

Having made this statement about the importance of modern languages let me reinforce it by placing modern languages in the curriculum.

Modern languages, in my view, should be placed right in the centre of the curriculum—we accept English, Maths and Science as basic and central—and next I would strongly advocate a role for Modern Languages.

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I would like to illustrate its position by aligning it with other subjects which seem, incontestably, to be a necessary and accepted part of a youngster's education, for example

Geography	:	it seems to me that a geographer is trying to show a child what lies, or is around the corner or beyond the next field.
History	:	the historian is trying to inform the child, or to get the youngster to realise what happened the day before yesterday, and to learn from that experience.
Modern Languages Teacher	:	his task is to show the child how the person *beyond* his neighbour lives, thinks, feels and talks.

Some, at this point, may argue that this role can best be fulfilled through European studies, but I would argue that a course of study about another people and country, without use of that people's language reduces the impact and force of that course of study, and is, at best, a substitute.

Why Modern Languages for All?

Let me now categorise the reasons for teaching Modern Languages in the secondary/comprehensive school. I have stated what I believe to be the position of Modern Languages in the curriculum with reference to other subjects, but we must be more disciplined yet in our advocacy of the role of Modern Languages.

ACADEMIC : the first reason I offer is academic, this must be stated at once, since the opponents of the mixed-ability comprehensive stance seem to imply that academic achievement or purpose and mixed-ability are mutually exclusive, nothing could be further from the truth. What I would say is that is not the only goal of Modern Language teaching, but forms one aspect of the argument for teaching modern languages across the curriculum. I personally pay tribute to the academic training of which most, if not all Modern Language teachers have experience. I shall take two instances of how my own academic training gave me pleasure.

(a) one of the set books when I was taking 'A' levels was "*Le Notaire du Havre*" by Georges Duhamel. In that book I found one of the most interesting characters about whom I have read – the father. So struck was I by him, and the book that where and when possible e.g. during educational or private visits to France I have searched in bookshops and bought the sequels in the "Chronique des Pasquier", culminating in finding an original signed copy by Duhamel.

(b) secondly, in reading and studying "Regain" by Jean Giono, and two of his earlier novels "Colline", and "Un de Beaumugnes" one can appreciate the development of a writer.

I use these two examples to clear up, I hope, any impression that those who favour a Mixed-Ability/Comprehensive philosophy are antagonistic to academic learning, rather we appreciate this discipline and employ it if and when the need arises in our students.

VOCATIONAL : there seems to be a belief amongst colleagues in other disciplines (and, unfortunately, this view through ignorance can be found in fellow Modern Language teachers) that Modern Languages have no use at all outside the classroom.
Indeed, this view was put to me by a colleague. You are, no doubt, aware of this argument that Modern Languages is now fulfilling the role of Latin and will fade away into the dark recesses of the curriculum in a similar manner. To counter this view I did a little "research" in the situations vacant columns of the newspapers in our school library for a period of one week, and found that there is, indeed, a need and a growing one at that, for people with ability and fluency in a modern foreign language PLUS a professional qualification/skill besides. In which fields? Let me acquaint you with some – law, accountancy, marketing, electrical, electronic and other engineering, sales, advertising, shipbuilding trades, banking and teaching.
This list clearly indicates that Modern Languages do have a use outside school. The community, the nation is revealing a need in business, commerce, in the professions, in employment that we, as part of the community ought not to ignore. The community is requiring us to be aware of the necessity to extend

our curriculum and function. As in the days of "The Great Debate", of public accountability can we? dare we? are we permitted to ignore this need? I think it would be foolhardy of us to stand aside. Let us heed the words of a German ambassador in London to the effect that "You may buy from us in English, but you will not sell to us in "English".

LINGUISTIC : here I use the word in its simplest meaning. Many youngsters enjoy using words and language. Presented in schools through another language we provide a motivator for a child to learn. Modern Languages can catch a youngster's imagination, leading him on to fulfil and cater for this need.

VACATIONAL : Yes, holidays! But the uninformed say that everyone "over there" speaks English anyway! This view, I'm sure, to many of us lacks a great deal in accuracy. All of us encourage our students to visit the "target language country": school educational visits to us at OBSS are part of the curriculum. What are our objectives?– language practice and usage, of course, but also we have cultural objectives in mind.
When a youngster visits another country the *experience* of meeting different people, being in a different cultural environment/ milieu is a valid educational goal. How much more is the worth increased if use of the target language, at many levels, can develop individual initiatives and scope for life at any stage.
There is an attraction about foreign countries, we want to know more about a foreign country and its people: if our approach is to try the language so much better is our reception abroad.

SUPPORTIVE : (a) in the first place we are supportive to all the children. They come to us from primary school with notions of their own success/ failure imprinted: Those used to success will continue in that vein, but the "failures" have a new start, a new chance to find success. This has been my experience. I don't believe this to be a figment of subjective hopes or delusions, but to be a reality every September.

(b) to other subjects: children in Modern Language class are learning to speak, to listen. We provide basic lessons in speech: the qualities we expect are legibility, spelling, clarity, function of communication.

INVENTION : Were Modern Languages teaching non-existent then someone would have to invent it: the cry would go up from politicians, the general and educational press to make room for it in the curriculum. Can you imagine a school without Modern Languages? Why do you make this statement with certainty? Well, have you been in an F.E. college in the first week in September? Those of us who have taken evening classes find that the Modern Languages classes cater for two needs.

(i) conversation–cultural, vacational, social
(ii) GCE classes for qualifications.

My classes were of all ages and of all backgrounds.

I hope these six reasons are evidence to you that there is a broad philosophical basis for including Modern Languages for all at the secondary/comprehensive level. For too long, I feel, we have constructed our pyramidical language teaching structure upon too narrow a foundation: given these six reasons, not only ought the structure stand on a broader, surer base, but it may also flourish, and maybe even change its shape.

Why Use Mixed-Ability Methods?

But why use mixed-ability? This is perhaps the most emotive phrase in Modern Language teaching today. Why not let things be? If we agree with this feeling there is an explicit assumption that all is well, that classes, courses, examinations, philosophy within a school are generally all quite satisfactory, which is patently not the case.

Let us refer to the ideology upon which comprehensive education is based

(i) equality of opportunity
(ii) fair exploitation, use and distribution of resources (and keep in mind that a teacher is the best potential resource).

and let us also keep in mind the reasons stated for justifying the teaching of Modern Languages in the curriculum, and we ought to find that mixed-ability teaching methods fit, and grow logically from these premises. Mixed-ability teaching best fits comprehensive education.

Would other systems not fit as well?

Streaming : streaming assumes a fixed, decided intellectual capacity, where a class of thirty approximately move at the same rate. All are assumed to be able to read Chapter 6 Page 2 Exercise 1 at the same time, and at the same rate–is this thesis valid?

An important factor not to be excluded is teacher expectation, how he feels about his class, the level of work standard to be achieved and the goals expected. From experience, and generally I dare say, the criteria expected from class A to class F, or further, decline: I put it to you they are lowered from class C to class D.

Streaming also assumes accuracy in delineating groups, but it has been stated authoritatively that an error of a 10% margin can occur.

It is claimed that movement between streams can take place, but in which direction? and for what reasons? More often than not movement is downward, children are relegated: but if one should be promoted then logically he is at the bottom of his new stream. Where then the validity of the premise upon which streaming is based? and, a practical difficulty, will he be using the same course? Streaming suggests a rigidity which is suitable for components on a production assembly line, but is it the best system we can find that lends itself to an educational pattern for children?

Banding : in a more moderate shape has the same disadvantages as streaming: in both children are very often excluded from languages. Where is the research that proves that youngsters who are excluded from languages benefit in other subjects, or in their education generally?

Setting : can be done on a departmental basis, but the problems are inherently the same: in some schools different courses are used for different supposed levels of ability which exacerbate the situation.

Mixed-ability : (i) does not lower teacher expectation since each class is a cross-section of a year: the "sink" mentality–or "dump" if you prefer–is most certainly to be avoided, and in my experience is an important and positive feature of "MIXED-ABILITY".

(ii) Youngsters are allowed the opportunity to develop. I notice in our classes youngsters of all abilities spurting in their progress, levelling out on a plateau, then spurting to increase their achievement: this includes qualifiers and non-qualifiers.
Progress towards realising a youngster's potential is increased.

(iii) no-one is excluded from Modern Languages: the curriculum is available to all–stereotyping is reduced, and probably eliminated.

(iv) the discussion about the "whole" child nears a practical reality where value is given to practical, creative, physical, cultural and social achievement as well as intellectual.

Mixed-ability is compatible with the ideology that desires to place a child within a structure which allows that child the best opportunity to fulfil his potential.

HENRY SINNERTON
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